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PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA *FRESCOES*

FOURTEEN COLOUR PLATES

INTRODUCTION BY ROBERTO LONGHI



IRIS COLOUR BOOKS

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FRANCESCA
FRESCOES

FOURTEEN REPRODUCTIONS IN FULL COLOUR

INTRODUCTION BY
ROBERTO LONGHI

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THE IRIS BOOKS

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THE FRESCOES OF PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA

IN THE COURSE of their development architecture and painting never keep in step, for both these arts, but architecture in particular, are bound within the limits of their own peculiar attributes. The brilliant architect Brunelleschi was probably the first to grasp and to put into practice the great fundamental principles of the Renaissance, the conceptions of space-depth and perspective. The painters however, who also acknowledged these principles, were for many years obliged to adapt their art to the wall surfaces erected during the Gothic period, even though they worked in that spacious and restful Gothic architecture to be found in Italy. Masolino and Masaccio were faced with this problem when, c. 1424—27, they worked in the Brancacci Chapel at Florence, as was Piero della Francesca when given the task of completing the frescoes begun, some years previously, by that admirer of antiquity the Florentine painter, Bicci di Lorenzo, in the choir of the church of San Francesco at Arezzo, a building dating from the Gothic XIVth century. In my view, the height of the choir walls was not conducive to that unity of conception and optical impression which would have been attainable in a chapel or hall designed by Brunelleschi. This observation leaves out of consideration the fact that Brunelleschi was averse, on principle, to any decoration of his buildings, on the justifiable grounds that they were sufficiently "decorative" in themselves. Piero was obliged, therefore, to adapt his work to the older type of building and it was natural that in doing so he should take Masaccio as his model. He divided the walls into three large rectangles corresponding in their inter-relationship approximately to the Euclidean Golden Section. In this way he obtained three painting surfaces in stages one above the other, so that, in accordance

with Renaissance ideas, the eye of the beholder is led gradually upwards. A complicated experiment such as that of the frescoes in the Eremitani of Padua by his contemporary Mantegna, could not be considered by Piero. In the Mantegna frescoes the figures in the lower spaces are strongly foreshortened and are placed in a remote background; for Mantegna was reckoning on one definite point from which the work was to be viewed. This must be clearly stated in order to understand the architectural limitations which the observer must take into account if he wishes fully to appreciate the series of frescoes at Arezzo. If we were to see these frescoes ranged side by side — in accordance with Renaissance architecture — what an impression of uneven merit they would make! And this renders it all the more regrettable that the first painter entrusted some ten years later with the task of adorning the Renaissance chapel in the Medici Palace with frescoes should have been such a mediocre artist as Benozzo Gozzoli.

Attention must also be drawn to the subject matter of the frescoes, for here again the artist's conceptions are restricted. He must immerse himself in his subject if he is to bring it into harmony with his mode of expression. In the present case it is important to know whether the story of the "Legend of the Holy Cross" was decided upon on the first order for the work being given in 1447, in agreement with the medievalist Bicci di Lorenzo. Once it is realised what a favourite subject this much elaborated legend had become with the painters of the XIVth Century, there can be no doubt of this question being answered in the affirmative. For it would be characteristic of the young, modernistic Piero to follow, as regards subject-matter, the path already laid down by his predecessors. Moreover, it can be no mere coincidence that, whilst, twenty-five years earlier, Masaccio had recorded in the Brancacci Chapel events in the lives of the Apostles, giving them dramatic emphasis by means of the powerful orchestration of his chiaroscuro style, Piero should now, in the frescoes at Arezzo, succeed in his representations of that elaborate and adventurous saga which had come into being in the Middle Ages, as it were on the outskirts of Scripture history. Nevertheless, he was no doubt free to make his choice of the individual scenes.

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WHAT INCIDENTS in this complicated story did Piero select? We will give them here in the order in which they come in the legend: beginning with the "Death of Adam" it goes on to the "Meeting of Solomon and the Queen of Sheba", to the "Carrying away of the Holy Cross", the "Annunciation", "Constantine's Dream", "Constantine's Victory over Maxentius", the "Torturing of Judas", the "Finding

of the Holy Cross and the Miracle", the "Battle between Heraclius and Chosroes" and finally the "Return of the Cross to Jerusalem". If we seek to understand this narrative quite apart from any instructive or explanatory text, that is to say without reference to the "Golden Legend", it becomes clear that the religious kernel concealed in these pictures is hardly discernible, and that they seem rather to recall a mighty saga of secular life. The "Death of Adam" is no more than a solemn moment of existence in the life of a peasant; the "Reception of the Queen of Sheba at the Court of King Solomon" and the "Return of the Cross" are simply royal ceremonial occasions; the "Removal of the Holy Cross" and the "Finding of the Cross" give us scenes of simple everyday life; the "Torturing of Judas" represents an incident in a judicial court; the "Dream of Constantine" shows an army camp under the light of a full moon; the two battle scenes and those in the lowest spaces, with which the series is concluded, are reminiscent of contemporary tournaments.

In these pictures Piero displays his marked inclination to regard life as a perpetual drama and to interpret it as such. In contrast to the dramatically poetic treatment apparent in Masaccio's work, in which a few figures are crowded on a stage where the strong interchange of light and shade seems to personify the tension of their bodies like the beating of a pulse, Piero's world is spread before us like a drop-scene gleaming in many colours on which a calmer and more remote life-story is unfolded. Here we see the break of dawn, the bright noonday light, the gleam of a full moon. Beneath the soothing influence of this ever present light every incident is set amidst the changing scenery of buildings, figures, mountains, clouds and deeds of chivalry, with a natural clarity and dignity of vision derived from the stately clear-cut figures and the balanced colour masses. A splendid drama, staged, however, with a strongly marked feeling for proportion. In order to understand this it must once more be explained as briefly as possible how the personality of Piero della Francesca was enabled to express itself within the development of pictorial art of the Quattrocento.

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PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA was born in 1410 or 11 at Borgo San Sepolcro, a little town situated in an upper valley of the Tiber on the borders of Umbria and Tuscany. The boy received his earliest artistic impressions from the works of the Sienese Trecento — of that there can be no doubt. In the XIVth Century Sienese art had spread from the Val di Chiana to Arezzo and Borgo San Sepolcro. The finest painting in the town, and one which Piero was always to bear in mind, was

the glowing, colourful altarpiece by Nicolo di Segna. Its subject was the "Resurrection of Christ" (an appropriate one for the township of San Sepolcro). When Piero came to Arezzo, the little capital of the district, there would be the town's finest work of art for him to see in the Badia, an altarpiece by Pietro Lorenzetti. Sienese influence in this region was so powerful that, even at the time when Piero was in Florence completing his studies, a Sienese painter, Sassetta, was given the most important order for work in Borgo San Sepolcro.

Besides these childhood memories of a precious and delicate art in which light still radiated from the glowing colours, Piero was fortunate in that the period of his own mental development occurred between 1430 and 1440 whilst he was in Florence. Here it was possible for him to immerse himself again and again in XIVth Century works of art which, although already classed as antiquities, were nevertheless great; here also he could come to terms with the very latest creations of a Brunelleschi, a Masaccio, a Fra Angelico, or a Domenico Veneziano. Of the older masters, he turned his attention not only to the art of Giotto, but also, and to a greater extent, to the work of Naso di Banco in which — to use the idiom of the Trecento — that talent was already evident for translating mass and space-volume into evenly distributed colour planes for which Piero, and Giotto in his maturity, were distinguished.

As regards the newer ideas of the Renaissance, so much more important to a young artist, — Brunelleschi's modern treatment of space, his doctrine of "harmonious relationships" and its application to the mysterious principles of perspective in painting — there was no one who could grasp them and put them into practice better than Piero. Masaccio was the first to attempt it. In his treatment, space assumed the function of a stage on which the scene was enacted without undue dramatic fervour. Side by side with this development in Masaccio a similar quality became evident in the sculptures of Donatello. The magical colour of the Trecento was thus in danger of becoming a lost Paradise, if Alberti, during this same period, although still adhering to the modern views on space and "the cross-section through the visual pyramid", had not pointed out with his acute intelligence the possibility of a combination of "relative colours", shining examples of which were to be found in the works of Fra Angelico and Domenico Veneziano. From Fra Angelico's work the ardent, transcendental colours of the Trecento radiated afresh; in Veneziano's that "relativity of colours" was effected by a transformation of the pigments into a light of a different nature, no longer transcendental, but natural and almost physical although in it was mirrored the very spirit of spring, having its origin in an exact observation of detail such as, up to that time, was only to be found in the work of Jan van Eyck. It is, therefore, not without significance that, in 1439, Piero appears as co-worker with that same Domenico Veneziano. His

thoughts, however, moved in a far wider circumference. His intellect perceived the world within the framework of a poetical pictorial vision, that of the harmonious concord of space-planes, combining under the directorship of perspective to form a colour drama of unceasing grandeur and loveliness. (It was not until many years later that he wrote his treatise on Perspective.)

When, about 1445, he received his first order from his fellow citizens of San Sepolcro, Piero had already found a style of his own. In the same year he was commissioned by the Brotherhood of the Misericordia to paint an altarpiece of a "Madonna with protecting cloak and Saints". This work, which was completed but slowly, reveals a steady progress in artistic power, from John the Baptist and St. Sebastian, depicted in the massive, weighty manner of Masaccio, to the other more lightly conceived figures and richer colouring. The same progress may be perceived in the "Baptism of Christ" now in London, the "Scourging of Christ" at Urbino, and in the "St. Hieronymus" at Venice. In all these later paintings the objects in the foreground are presented with a clarity and truth to Nature that may be compared with the clearcut, microscopic vision of Jan van Eyck, whilst objects in the distance blend into the atmosphere after the free manner of modern impressionism.

The fact that the Bacci family, in commissioning the frescoes at Arezzo, did not apply to Piero but reverted to the worthy Bicci di Lorenzo, may well indicate, not that Piero's fame had not yet penetrated to his native district, but rather that he was, at that time, absent from the neighbourhood. He was probably already at Urbino; it is certain at any rate that he was in Ferrara in 1449 and in Rimini in 1451 — that is to say in the very years during which Alberti was at work in those towns. It is hardly necessary to observe that the Ferrara frescoes, no longer in existence, were, without question, classed among Piero's greatest works and formed the foundation of the great Ferrara school of painting from Bona da Ferrara to Cosimo Tura, Francesco Cossa and Ercole di Roberti. The votive picture in the Tempio del Malatesta at Rimini, painted in 1451, is an early example of the artist's unusually free and mundane interpretation in the treatment of a religious subject. The young ruler, who refused to be parted from his faithful deerhounds, kneels before his patron saint who, himself a monarch, is receiving him, not in a church, but in a chamber of his royal palace. The grand scale on which the grouping and spacing is arranged unfettered by rules of symmetry or of emphasis on a central axis, the spaciousness, the impressive colour harmonies — all these occur again in the Arezzo frescoes which, as already said, were executed immediately after the votive picture in Rimini.

THIS INTRODUCTION does not aim at a detailed analysis of the Arezzo frescoes, but rather at discussing certain aspects arising from a consideration of the work and of details which are reproduced in this book for the first time correctly and in their true colouring.

However often one visits the choir at Arezzo it is indeed true that one is filled with as much delight as on the first occasion when confronted with the indescribable magnificence of those full, flowing colours on which light seems to fall like a blessing. The colours seem as clear as on the day they were first laid on, to have been called forth like the elements of Creation. If Masaccio's share in that rebirth of vision brought about by Tuscan painting of the early Quattrocento consisted in a feeling for plastic energy in form, Piero contributed the sense of a cosmos of colour glowing under the first rays of a newly created sun. This, perhaps, is the reason why his colours appear so pure, like those of the rainbow, or like the vowel-sounds in the famous sonnet by Rimbaud.

In his work, forms, also, are clear and significant. Thus a closer inspection shows that Piero's colours are to be regarded as quantities, as extensions in the plane, but of such perfection that they emerge from the natural light as though from the depths. How this harmonious interplay of form and colour comes about, in which the artist first transfers certain elementary forms into the third dimension and then, by the application of his "perspective synthesis", brings them back into the visual plane of colour — that is the essential secret of Piero della Francesca's style. Piero acquired this style by exhaustive study of those principles evolved by Brunelleschi from the measurement of ancient buildings; but he applied them to the human figure. These principles demanded the strictly accurate measurement of forms constructed according to the propositions of Euclid, not those variable outlines to be found in Brunelleschi's work and even in the inspiring chiaroscuro of Masaccio. Hence, Piero, in contrast to Masaccio's restless dramatic style, gives to his figures and objects a dignity of mien and a noble serenity and solemnity of gesture, which would recall the Egyptian and archaic Greek bas-reliefs, had they not been conceived on a scale and immersed in a light unknown to antiquity. Regarded from the standpoint of modern art it might be said that Piero anticipated and actually brought to complete realisation Cézanne's guiding principles, the secret meaning of which will always remain a closed book to the uninitiated, to those reserving their admiration exclusively for plastic illusion and the value of line: "*Quand la couleur est à sa richesse, la forme est à sa plénitude*".

In the series of frescoes at Arezzo — the work on which extended over several years — it is true that indications of some development may be traced, as, for instance, in the two lunettes of the "Death of Adam" and the "Return of the Cross", clearly the first to be executed, in which the purely Florentine characteristics of linear out-

line may still be seen, which Piero abandoned in the later frescoes. Nevertheless it may truly be asserted that, taking this series of frescoes as a whole, there is not one section which does not put into practice the principles of balance and synthetic relationship between form and colour.

In the first, large scene, for instance, showing two consecutive incidents, the "Queen of Sheba at the Bridge" and the "Reception in Solomon's Palace", the whole composition is evenly balanced between the buildings on the right and the landscape on the left in which the two trees with their large dome-shaped crowns, emphasise the spatial distance receding to the mountain tops on the horizon. In this new technique distance and foreground are interwoven. Every space between the figures is completely filled with colour which extends to the most distant hills on the one hand and to the polychrome marble walls of Solomon's state chamber on the other.

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LET US CONSIDER for a moment the portions of the frescoes reproduced in this book. In the left half of the picture (Plate III) we see the Queen's squires who are holding the horses. Apparently a mere episode. Taken in conjunction with the whole, however, this episode is of no less importance than the parts played by the principal characters. An effect of spatial depth is not aimed at here; the contrast of the two squires corresponds to that of the horses and the alternation of the figures finds its equivalent in the colours, as on the field of a coat of arms: blue soldier's doublet against a red soldier's doublet; dark grey stockings against red ones; two white horses beside two bays; a brown and a light-blue saddle. But this unbroken chessboard arrangement of colour would not be bearable were it not for the relative attitudes of the figures which, whether from front, side, or back view, are shown reduced almost to geometrical forms, and for the transformation of chiaroscuro into a balanced scale of translucent tones by which the luminosity of the colouring, so far from being weakened, is strengthened. Every colour space, every individual accent of colour finds its counterpart: the grass of the meadow, the mountain sides, melt into the green and gray of the background on the same level between the heads and the knees of the horses; a horse's mouth gapes open like a huge fruit and between his red lips teeth are visible like white nut kernels. The other part of this fresco shows us the Queen kneeling at the little bridge over the Siloe (Plate IV), whilst her ladies-in-waiting form a half-circle round her. In their pale pink, green and white mantles the folds of which gleam like glaciers in the sun, they lend proportion to the composition, forming as it were a girdle round the Queen; with their unselfconscious gestures and air of quiet devotion,

their majestic necks and heads stand out against the grey mountain landscape like giant blossoms.

In the "Reception of the Queen of Sheba in Solomon's Palace" (Plate V) the walls of the state chamber are lined with great slabs of flecked marble which occupy all the spaces between the figures ranged in a half-circle. The treatment is not dramatic, but is simply the presentation of a royal ceremonial occasion: a respectful inclination; two hands meeting in greeting. But the silent immobility of those present is sufficiently impressive and convincing to give the effect of a momentous event. Onlookers of both sexes encircle the main characters; in the simple draping of their garments they resemble archaic statues come to life. The red, black and white footwear form a triangle, the folds of the long robes are grooved like the shafts of ancient columns, the cloaks are lined with contrasting colours. The men are wearing caps geometrically shaped, and the women's trailing robes, falling from a girdle, resemble in their powerfully modelled outlines archaic amphorae crowned with heads, giving the effect of pale, delicate porcelain.

The "Annunciation" (Plate VI), painted at a time when Fra Angelico was applying his art to the gentle humility of his Madonna of the Annunciation in St. Mark's, also bears so markedly the character of a courtly occasion, that the suggestion has more than once been made that it is a representation of an angelic announcement to the Empress Helena. The affinities to the Tuscan school, the lines of the robe flowing from under the girdle and rippling over the feet of the Virgin, the Gothic, inlaid ornaments, and the swelling outlines of the column which would not have displeased Brunelleschi — all these lead one to conclude that Piero painted this "Annunciation" before the frescoes already described. On the other hand the gleaming crystalline pink of the angel's outer garment above the strong red of the stockings, the Madonna's cloak falling round her like a cupola, the domelike head supported by the cylindrical neck suggesting analogy with the nearby pillars, the ray of light caught, as in the strings of a gleaming harp, in the folds of the veil, the wide distribution of colour over the foreground, are all indications that, in painting this "Annunciation", Piero was already giving expression to his new artistic conceptions.

The adjoining fresco showing "Constantine's Vision" (VII) has become famous because it is the first Renaissance work to represent a night scene. That does not mean to say that the desire to depict incidents in an evening or night setting had not been evident from the Gothic period onwards and had not found expression from the violet tones of stained glass in the cathedrals to the miniature painters of Burgundy and the brothers Van Eyck. Piero's vision of the wonders of Nature, however, is something altogether new, as though he would say: Does anything exist more miraculous than a clear, moonlight night in Umbria?

The secret of this miraculous dream-vision will doubtless remain forever sealed behind the closed lips and eyelids of the sleeping, dreaming Emperor. For the soldiers on guard, as for the observer, the vision becomes a fairylike phenomenon of Nature. The rays of the full moon streaming out of a darkened sky through a rift in the clouds bathes the pale attendant in a still paler light which casts a liquid gleam over the armour of the two motionless guards and dissolves in the interior of the imperial tent into a fine mist of light. Of all the night scenes, from those by the brothers Van Eyck to the "*Maître du cœur d'amour épris*" and Fouquet, from Raphael to Caravaggio, from Rembrandt to Seurat, this one is the closest to nature that has ever been painted, and, no doubt, for this reason the most magical.

Piero turned from this unique "*Full Moon over the Field Camp*" to full daylight, to a conception of sunlight in the "*Victory of Constantine over Maxentius*" which, according to the legend, took place immediately after Constantine's vision.

Even from the fragments that remain, it can be seen that this painting was probably the most powerful in the whole Arezzo cycle. Its partial destruction is without question one of the greatest losses ever sustained among Italian works of art. The colour plate (VIII) is a reproduction of the left half only of the picture, the part least damaged. It gives us an idea, however, of the magnificence and monumental effect achieved in this battle array. In an isolated, seemingly timeless landscape of lovely Italy it maintains the incident at the very peak of tension.

It records the moment when Constantine's cavalry have halted, as though arrested by the dazzling brilliance, at the banks of the Tiber, whilst the Emperor is holding aloft against the blue sky the luminous slender cross as the trophy of his victory, bringing the chargers to a standstill. The horses' hoofs, moving softly as though shod with felt, throw light shadows before them, like an advance guard. The massed shapes of their backs grouped geometrically rise in curves above their slender white, grey and brown, interwoven legs. The triangular plan is repeated in the placing of the horses and, on the rounded cruppers, by the regular pattern of the red and blue saddlecloths. Indescribably noble and savage, the warriors are seated like towers on these splendid horses — terrifying and magnificent in their shining imperial armour. Their awe-inspiring battle helmets are still borne aloft and above them flutters, like a sail in the breeze, the yellow and red banner of the imperial standard; the forest of lances, with their green, pink and white points, cuts sharply into the blue sky in which clouds ringed with light are floating. The manner in which the right half of the picture, now so grievously damaged, linked up with this part of the fresco, showing Maxentius's cavalry in flight on the opposite bank of the Tiber, can only be surmised from a poor but invaluable watercolour painted by Ramboux about a hundred years ago, and now in the collection of engravings at Düsseldorf.

At that time the clear waters of the winding Tiber were still to be seen in the middle distance, with the reflections in it of the little farm houses, as in a Provençal landscape by Cézanne. Even, however, from the sparse remnants still in existence with their glimpses of a southern, sun-drenched landscape, it can be seen how boldly and skilfully Piero could handle the "impressionistic" treatment of distance, in contrast to the petty, meticulous style of the painters in the North. Modern "plein-air painting" has never surpassed this standard.

As counterparts to the "Reception in King Solomon's Palace" Piero depicted on the opposite wall two incidents in the life of Empress Helena: the "Finding" and the "Miracle of the Holy Cross" (Plates IX, X, XI). His work on this new subject brought him to the conclusion that, despite the exalted status of the principal character, the scenes could be laid in the open air. The exhumation of the Cross is given as a simple labour of work in the fields beneath the lower town, in front of whose gates are depicted the testing of the Cross and the Miracle with no more ceremony than that attending the weighing of goods at a customs barrier. The two subjects are indeed divided by a definite central line, emphasised by the foreshortened outline of the little polychrome temple in the middle distance. This, however, does not enclose the figures as does the reception chamber in Solomon's Palace. The artist was thus able to pass from the ploughed fields on the left rising towards the town on the high ground to the sun-bleached white and red walls. On the right the scene is just such a one as greets the traveller of to-day, on entering an old, Italian provincial town with its dark, narrow streets into which the sun penetrates only at the crossings, with its square, red towers and the great shining dome that, from afar, prompts him to enquire the way to the Cathedral square.

It must not be imagined, however, that these paintings are lacking in solemnity, simply that, to Piero, ceremonial was something natural and everyday. In the "Raising of the three crosses" instructions are being given, remarks exchanged, the workers are standing, listening, resting. Even the court dwarf — a burlesque figure of the Middle Ages serving to provoke mirth — appears here as essential to the whole, taking as grave an interest in the proceedings as the others. The outstretched hands of the Empress and her attendant sway like flowers close above his head, whilst the arms of the other figures are carrying objects in such a manner as to make them retreat into the background, as do the two crosses and the axe borne by the peasant over his shoulder. The simplest actions are characterised by a natural dignity, so that Vasari, referring to a worker, remarks: "his whole bearing is expressive of an eagerness to hear what St. Helena is saying, which could not be more clearly indicated". The figure of this dry Umbrian peasant, burnt brown by the sun, the gesture with which he is using his spade to support



his foot, showing an almost symbolical unity between the man and his tool, are the perfection of authenticity.

In the right half of the "Miracle of the Cross" buildings, objects and figures are harmonised with effortless precision. It is scarcely necessary to point out the weight and proportions of the Cross which, after the Miracle, seems to neutralise the spatial tension between the groups of kneeling and standing figures. Nor need we give a detailed description of the little polychrome temple making an abstract pattern, which with its arches, circles and veinings makes a frame for the formally grouped figures engaged in prayer. It cannot be said that this is purely imaginary architecture put there to serve the purposes of the artist. For here is a style of architecture embodying the ideas of Alberti, soon to pass on, with Piero's paintings, from Rimini to Venice.

We have already indicated briefly the probable order in which the Arezzo frescoes were executed. It seems likely that the "Miracle of the Cross" was painted a little prior to the "Reception by King Solomon" in view of the attitude of the young man risen from the dead in which a reversion to archaic art — from the period between the art of Olympia and that of Myron — might be traced. The emphatic drawing of the outlines, however, warns against a hasty conclusion and suggests rather the work of another hand, a hand moreover whose touch is discernible in other portions of the same fresco by a slightly inferior artistic quality.

In painting of the compact and concentrated structure characterising works executed by Piero alone, in which the connecting links are quite indiscernible, it is inevitable that, in the carrying out by other hands of his cartoons, any attempt at imitation of his style must result in distortion with all the faults of a literary translation. Of the Arezzo frescoes, indeed, only the following can be regarded with certainty as purely original work by Piero: "The Death of Adam"; "Reception in King Solomon's Palace"; "Annunciation"; "Constantine's Dream", and the "Victory over Maxentius". In all the others a lesser or a greater part must be assigned to the workers who carried out the Master's cartoons — to a lesser extent in the "Finding of the Cross", and to a greater degree in the "Battle between Heraclius and Chosroes" with which the cycle of frescoes is closed.

The central part and the right half of this fresco, reproduced in colour in the present volume (Plates I, II and XII), bear evidence of help by other hands, whilst the left half is almost exclusively Piero's work, but is so badly damaged that it does not lend itself to reproduction. Once the observer has realised the overwhelmingly higher quality of the portions executed by Piero himself, he will be able to reconstruct for himself the original conception of the "Battle between Heraclius and Chosroes", as imagined by Piero della Francesca, only a small portion of which, however, was actually carried out by him. The observer should take this amount of

trouble, if only for the purpose of refuting a frequently expressed opinion that the subject-matter and Piero himself are to blame for work of an inferior quality. For it is plain for all to see that, if Italian art cannot claim to possess in the "Heraclius Battle" a worthy counterpart to the "Alexander Battle", this is due entirely to deficiencies in its transcription.

The artist's idea is clearly evident. It was to contrast this victory, achieved without a sword-stroke, with the brilliant array of Constantine's cavalry at the climax of the turmoil of a battle in full swing. It has been rashly observed that such a subject as a "battle-movement" was not suited to Piero's dispassionate temperament. But here quite a different question is raised, namely, to enquire what Piero's splendid far-reaching vision might have made of such a subject. Starting with the assumption that, in painting, such a "battle-movement" cannot be shown as an actual movement but as a halt in the attack on the enemy massed troops, Piero, true to his style, seized this moment of impact at its climax when it could not "develop" further. Thus, Chosroes' son is falling at that instant, stabbed in the throat; an incident for ever consummated. A lance is hurtling through the air; we must seek to find its destination on the plan drawn in perspective in order to realise how, with lances hurled from other directions, it forms a geometrical figure whose point seems to be piercing the white clouds. At the same moment another lance is splintered, but, by careful calculation, it is breaking within the triangle exactly on the central axis of the entire battle scene.

Here, therefore, we may see the most complete antithesis to Antonio Pollaiuolo's "Battle of the Nudes" which is wholly movement in being. For this "almost inconceivable shambles of wounded, fallen and dead" as Vasari described it (consisting incidentally of no more than forty combatants) has already "come to an end". The battle so to speak, was "concluded" when, to use Piero's language, it became possible to interweave the forms to make a kind of picture puzzle in colour composed of the intercrossing, concentration and continuous interlocking of objects: the sky, the field camp, the weapons and military actions and human figures. It is the idea of a battle as though "behind glass" conceived with a brutal clarity of vision. Here Piero passes from the clear simplicity of "Constantine's Victory" to clarity in complexity. The artistic method, however, like the subject, remains similar. One may attempt to say: from top to bottom or from bottom to top, from left to right or from right to left — all these are mere words having no significance in face of this wall of many colours laid on in the manner of tarsia work, rising up like an abstraction hardly converted into reality. Even the short space of time required to describe all this: clouds, camp activities, banners fluttering

against a sky as blue as the borders of the standards; the swaying of the hand-to-hand fights; the single combats; the brown heads of the chargers rising above their brightly decked cruppers; the white, green, and light blue helmets; the armour and coats of arms with their heraldic fields; the wounded from whose mouths the blood is trickling like strings of red coral — the mere enumeration of all these takes much longer than the complicated scene itself takes to enact, and here shown at its climax and defying all adequate description in words.

We felt that it was important to make clear the original conception which the Master had in view and which, in the transcription by other hands, was only approximately realised. Whatever high aims, however, were here to remain unfulfilled were fully compensated for in another absolutely authentic work executed by the Master during that same year, probably at the very same time when his assistants were working on the transcription of the cartoon at Arezzo. We are referring to the fresco of "Christ's Resurrection" at Borgo San Sepolcro (Plates XIII and XIV).

As regards the subject-matter of the Resurrection, it is of course obvious that, in his treatment of this most sublime and transcendental of all religious themes, Piero was obliged to maintain a strict, ritual symmetry. The Christ rising from the sepulchre forms the central axis, the pivot of Christian belief. But with what natural grace Piero has clothed that awe-inspiring immobility. Thus, after long winter days, does the sunlight shine in the early dawn of an April morning. In this light Christ's robe glows with a tender red recalling a peach tree that has blossomed after the first mild spring night. But the guards, sunk in symbolic sleep — here unassailably withdrawn as though in death, there seeming lost in a blissful ecstasy of unconsciousness, as though awaiting mysterious happenings — do not awaken and know nothing of the events of the night. Dawn is about to break, the shadows round their brightly coloured feet are growing shorter, the inner folds of the short green cloaks take on a reddish tinge; the rays define the hairs on their skin coats, and border with saffron yellow the clouds above the lonely mountain landscape, gradually filling it with light. Christ, awe-inspiring in His remoteness, His features like those of a pale, Umbrian peasant who has risen before daybreak, one foot resting on the edge of the sarcophagus as though on the edge of His field, surveys with deep sorrow His Kingdom of this World.

Thus the artist's inspiration has enabled him to show a natural connection between the sublime subject of Christ's Resurrection and an actual sunrise on a spring morning over the Italian landscape, without sacrificing anything of its symbolical significance.

Piero never surpassed his achievements in the frescoes at Arezzo and in the "Resurrection" at Borgo San Sepolcro of the same period. His later works, which need not be described here — the "St. Magdalen" at Arezzo, the "Young Hercules" in the Gardner Museum at Boston, the famous diptych the "Duke and Duchess of Montefeltre" in the Uffizi at Florence and the altarpiece in the Pinacoteca Vannucci at Perugia, the fragments of the altarpiece in San Agostino at Borgo San Sepolcro, the altarpiece from Urbino in the Brera at Milan, the "Madonna" of Senigallia now at Urbino and the "Birth of Christ" in the National Gallery of London — extend to the year 1480. They all reveal the unrivalled wealth of his genius, penetrating to the depth of his subjects; their wide artistic vision, however, gives no evidence of any further development from the period we have had under consideration. Piero died, blind, in 1492.

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IF WE TURN our attention once more to the Arezzo frescoes and the "Resurrection" in Borgo San Sepolcro, both created between 1450 and 1460, and cast our eyes further over time and space, it will at once be realised in what direction and to what extent Piero's great creative powers exercised a compelling influence. When the neighbouring Tuscan school of painting in the Quattrocento, for instance, is considered, in which the same decade only produced frescoes by Castagno, by Filippo Lippi at Prato and those by Benozzo Gozzoli at Montefalco, the change that took place later in the linear and plastic rendering of form in the Florentine school cannot be overlooked. Although not present in person, Piero's influence, whilst allowing the greatest artists to show their true value, is evident as much in historical continuity as in a transvaluation of values hitherto prized too highly.

The close relations between the art of Piero and that of the Venetian school seem to have a quite different significance. The special case of Mantegna and the archaeological and academic byways pursued by him after 1460 in no way affects the far-reaching harmony between Piero's vision and the great Venetian painters especially in the period about 1475. In the same way the synthesis of form and colour arrived at by Piero by virtue of his restraining perspective, smoothed the way for the introduction of the Venetian school of colourists and created the first principles which enabled the noble epic style of a Bellini, an Antonello and a Carpaccio to develop, and so onward to the wonders of the young Titian and to Veronese.

It was not until very much later after a long interval of centuries described as "Baroque" and "Romantic" that those early conceptions of the relationship between form and colour revived, by mysterious and still unrecognised paths, in a new shape to which the gentle poetry of "Impressionism" gave expression in the art of Cézanne and Seurat and in "Syntheticism". That is the hidden and not yet realised history of the rediscovery of Piero della Francesca, not so much by the art critics — which would have no great significance — but by the artists themselves.

ROBERTO LONGHI

NOTES ON THE STORY OF THE AREZZO FRESCOES BY PIERO DELLA FRANCESCA BY ROBERTO LONGHI

TOWARDS the end of the year 1447 the Bacci family of Arezzo commissioned Bicci di Lorenzo, a painter of small renown from Florence, still entirely preoccupied with the Gothic point of view, to paint the frescoes in the choir of San Francesco at Arezzo. Bicci's long period of activity was on its downward grade and he died in 1452, having completed only a small portion of his work in the choir, on the soffit of the entrance arch and on the vaulting of the ceiling.

In spite of the views frequently expressed, it need not be assumed that a painter following the new artistic tendencies such as Piero della Francesca had to wait for this death before having the commission transferred to him. At the time when the order was first given, in 1447, the artist, whose native town was Borgo San Sepolcro, was probably not in the district, and his fame had not yet penetrated beyond the neighbourhood in which he was working. When, however, Piero returned, about 1452, the fame of the works executed by him for the Este's in Ferrara, for Sigismondo Malatesta in Rimini and for the Duke and Duchess of Montefeltre in Urbino had doubtless long preceded him. If it is sought to place the resumption of work on the Arezzo frescoes at a date considerably later than 1452, it would then be difficult to find an explanation why Piero, considering the rapid development of the new artistic tenets and the fact that he had reached the zenith of his fame, did not decide to repaint the few portions executed by his predecessor in order to ensure a unity of effect in the series of frescoes. The fact that Piero preferred to complete the one or two spaces in the vaulting still left vacant by Bicci and even to fill the Gothic niches painted by the latter with the missing figures of two Fathers of the Church, definitely supports the assumption that the continuation of the work was taken in hand without delay. Moreover, the great Malatesta fresco at Rimini, dated 1451, already displays an adherence to the principles of form and colour structure put into practice in the Arezzo frescoes. As the latter are referred to by 1466 as famous works of art, there seems every justifica-

tion for stating that Piero began them shortly after 1452 and completed them by 1459, the year in which the artist was summoned to the Papal Court in Rome. This chronological sequence agrees with Piero's age at the time; he was between forty and fifty years of age and appears to have reached full artistic maturity.

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THE SUBJECT treated by Piero in the frescoes in the choir at Arezzo, the "*Legend of the Holy Cross*", is a fantastically elaborated story having its origin in the Christian Middle Ages, in the period of chivalry and the Crusades, when early Christian relics were being sought. It was recorded, as early as the XIIIth Century, in Jacopo da Voragine's book of marvels, the "*Legenda Aurea*", and, before long, became known in the Italian language also. The earliest representations in painting of this legend, apart from a few Ducento examples, are the frescoes in the choir of Santa Croce at Florence, by Agnolo Gaddi, c. 1380, and the far more original and lively series of frescoes by Cenni di Francesco in the chapel of the Order of the Cross at Volterra (1410). When Piero started to work on this material, so rich in episodes, he divided the chapel walls into three fields and related the complicated legend in ten main scenes, arranged as follows:—

The series begin above in the lunette on the right with "*The Death of Adam*"; his son Seth is placing under Adam's tongue the budding sprig from the Tree of Knowledge given to him by the archangel and guardian of the Garden of Eden. From this sprig the tree is to spring from whose wood the Cross will later be made.

On the same wall in the wide course below is shown the "*Visit of the Queen of Sheba to King Solomon*"; this incident is divided into two parts: In the first (Plates III, IV) the Queen is nearing the end of her journey and is kneeling by the little bridge over the Siloe at the moment of receiving the revelation that the bridge is constructed from wood taken from

the chosen tree; in the second half the "*Reception by King Solomon*" is depicted (Plate V).

In the upper space to the right of the large window appears the "*Removal and secret burial of the Sacred Wood*" by order of Solomon.

On the opposite space to the left of the window, the lower course contains the "*Annunciation to the Virgin Mary*" (Plate VI). In this Piero probably intended to indicate the hidden meaning of the principal episodes which find their fulfilment in the death of Christ on the Cross, although the mediaeval legend on which the frescoes are based does not include the Annunciation.

Opposite this fresco on the wall to the right of the chapel window is "*Constantine's Dream*". The angel is showing him the sacred symbol of the Cross which is to bring him victory (Plate VII).

The wide space below is occupied by "*Constantine's Victory over Maxentius*" (Plate VIII).

In the narrow space above the centre course to the left of the window is seen the "*Torture of Judas*" by order of the Empress Helena in order to extract from him the confession where the Jews had hidden the Holy Cross.

The large central space on the left wall contains the two consecutive scenes of the "*Finding and the Miracle of the Holy Cross*" (Plates IX, X, XI).

The scene in the space below is advanced by three centuries. It shows the "*Victory of the Emperor Heraclius over the Persian King Chosroes*" and the "*Beheading of Chosroes*" on the steps of the throne which had been adorned by him with relics of the Holy Cross and of the Passion (Plates I, II, XII). The lunette on the left wall concludes the legend with the "*Restoration of the Holy Cross to Jerusalem by Heraclius*".

A more detailed account of the various versions of the Legend of the Holy Cross may be found in Kemper's *Mittelalterliche Sagen vom Paradiese und vom Holze Christi* (Cologne, 1897). But the most accurate literary documentation of the representations of the Legend in Italian art is contained in the *Legenda Aurea* already mentioned. It is obtainable in numerous editions and translations which are all given in the edition published by Batelli in the old Tuscan language (Florence, 1924).

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THE LONG and varied story of the criticisms to which the Arezzo frescoes have been subjected in the course of changing periods and artistic taste can only be briefly indicated here.

After the widespread appreciation accorded them by Vasari (1550), who praised the fresco cycle as "one of the most outstanding works of Italian art of which everyone is talking", they were forgotten for two centuries; they were, moreover, neglected materially, as evidenced by many damaged portions which, during the last fifty years, have been restored as far as possible. At the time of eighteenth century rationalism the great Italian historian Lanzi (1789) re-discovered them. In the first half of the XIXth Century, however, Stendhal, who had stayed in Arezzo, hardly mentions them. Rumohr (1827—31) had a poor opinion of them; Rio (c. 1840) condemns them in his sanctimonious and mystical "Primitivism". Lord Dennistoun's discerning "Purism" formed a more correct judgment of their significance, whereas Burckhardt (1855) again incomprehensibly decried them shortly before the thorough scientific research undertaken by Cavalcaselle (1864). In contrast to the unfavourable judgments of Vischer (1879) and Woltmann (1882), the French critics, with less "historical" than "artistic" sense, grasped the high quality of the Arezzo frescoes. It suffices here to mention Charles Blanc, who had copies of the frescoes put up in the chapel of the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. It is not impossible that they were seen there by Seurat and Gauguin. If that were the case, Piero della Francesca's frescoes may be regarded as the hidden but compelling source of "Syntheticism". The first monograph on Piero, by Witting, appeared in 1898, a few others have appeared during the last fifty years, in the course of which the Arezzo cycle has been ranked for all time with the noblest creations of art. Apart from the histories of art as a whole and from some art portfolios and monographs, such as those by Ricci (Rome, 1910), Graber (Basel, 1920) and Salmi (Bergamo, 1940), the following works dealing with modern research on Piero may be mentioned: Longhi, *Piero della Francesca e lo sviluppo della pittura veneziana* (in "L'Arte", 1914); A. Venturi, *Piero della Francesca* (Florence, 1922); Longhi, *Piero della Francesca* (Rome, 1927; 2nd enlarged edition, Milan, 1947); Toesca, *Piero della Francesca* (in "Enciclopedia Italiana", XXVII, 1935, p. 208—213).

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FRESCOES IN THE CHURCH OF SAN FRANCESCO, AREZZO THE CYCLE OF THE LEGEND OF THE HOLY CROSS

(Frontispiece)

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(In the text, p. 17)

II The Victory of Heraclius over the Persian King Chosroes

Right half, detail: Group of Soldiers

III The Queen of Sheba visiting King Solomon

Left half: Grooms and Horses

IV The Queen of Sheba visiting King Solomon

Right half: The Queen with her Ladies on the Bridge of Siloe

V Solomon receives the Queen of Sheba in his Palace

VI The Annunciation to the Virgin Mary

VII Constantine's Dream

VIII The Victory of Constantine over Maxentius

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IX The Finding of the Holy Cross

X The Miracle of the Holy Cross

XI The Miracle of the Holy Cross

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XII The Victory of Heraclius over the Persian King Chosroes

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IN THE COMMUNAL PALACE IN BORGO S. SEPOLCRO

XIII The Resurrection of Christ

XIV The Resurrection of Christ

Detail, the Sleeping Watch

PLATES

PLATES

























